**DUKE UNIVERSITY SOCIOLOGY**

# Living in Hell in the City of Angels: Identity Construction and Condition Management Among Black Homeless Men of Los Angeles' Skid Row

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**ABSTRACT**

A growing body of research on homelessness has focused on the means by which marginalized individuals effectively engage in impression management in the absence of traditional resources for self-presentation. My research focuses on the varieties of talk that black homeless men employ in "identity construction" and "condition management." This paper is based on a mixed methods study of the lives of 20 black homeless men of Los Angeles' Skid Row. Analysis revealed that respondents utilized four patterns of talk in order to make sense of themselves and their situation: (a) blaming, (b) stereotyping, (c) distancing, and (d) redemptive storytelling. These varieties of talk represent strategic methods by which the individual makes meaning of and copes with their state of homelessness. The implications of this study for future research will be discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a process of marginalization and delegitimization that extends beyond a loss of housing. At this moment in time, it plagues the physical and psychological well-being of over one million Americans, men, women, and children. Research on the homeless population has often focused on its debilitating factors, namely substance abuse, incarceration, education, unemployment, family background, and race. When I began my research in the spring of 2011, I followed a similar route by studying the overrepresentation of Blacks in the homeless population of Los Angeles through an analysis of the intersection between substance abuse, social vulnerabilities, and racial dynamics. My previous findings provided individualized accounts on why Blacks are more likely to be homeless, and largely confirmed the host of factors that cause Black men to be marginalized in this manner. I am now, however, more interested in the manner by which the homeless effectively engage in "identity construction" and "condition management". With little to no worldly possessions, "talk" becomes the source of healing and hope for these marginalized individuals.

This paper will explore the varieties of "talk" Black men residing on Los Angeles' Skid Row employ in "identity construction" and "condition management". I seek to expand on previous research on "identity talk", the verbal construction and assertion of personal identities (Snow and Anderson 1987), and talk as a method of "impression management" and "self-presentation" (Goffman 1959). My findings indicate new forms of "talk" homeless persons engage in as they (1) work to construct, assert, and maintain desired personal identities (in the absence of other, more conventional resources for identity-making) and (2) cope with reality through effective condition management. In my analysis, I found four prevalent patterns of talk

among the homeless men: (a) blaming, (b) stereotyping, (c) distancing, and (d) redemptive storytelling that, together, they invoked in identity construction and condition management.

## BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to properly understand the concepts of identity construction and condition management within the context of homelessness, we must begin with a brief overview of the nature of homelessness in the United States.

### *Defining "Homelessness"*

According to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), a person is considered "homeless" when he/she resides in one of the three following places: 1) places not meant for human habitation such as cars, parks, sidewalks, and abandoned buildings, 2) an emergency shelter, or 3) transitional housing specifically for persons who previously lived on the streets or in an emergency shelter (Annual Homeless Assessment Report [AHAR] 2010). Included in this "homeless" definition are the temporarily homeless and the "chronically homeless," an unaccompanied individual with a disabling condition who has either been continuously homeless for a year or more or who has had at least four "episodes" of homelessness in the past three years (AHAR 2010). To fit this definition, a person must have been on the streets or in emergency shelters (not in transitional or permanent housing) during these episodes.

### *Homelessness in the United States*

The modern face of homelessness in America is "a Black man, around 40 years-old, living in a large, urban city" who frequents the local gas stations and major intersections (Kwateng 2007). While this may be the stereotypical image burned in the minds of many

Americans, it is rooted in reality. Individuals who use emergency shelters for long periods during a single year, that is, six months or more, are more likely than other sheltered individuals to be Black and be over 50 years old (AHAR 2010). Moreover, poor Blacks are "considerably more likely" to be homeless than poor people identifying themselves as members of other minority groups or as White and non-Hispanic (AHAR 2010). This was not always the case, however. In fact, in 1989, the overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities, particularly Blacks and Hispanics, among the homeless compared to their respective percentages in the general American population was described as a "relatively new phenomenon" that bewildered many (*Los Angeles Sentinel* 1989).

Table 1 illustrates that the impoverished Black and "multiple races" populations are significantly more likely to be homeless.

**Table 1. Characteristics of All Sheltered Homeless Persons Compared to US Poverty Populations (AHAR 2011)**

| Characteristic | % of All Sheltered Homeless Persons, 2010 | % of the 2009 US Poverty Population | % of the 2009 US Population |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender (Adults only)** | | | |
| Male | 62.3% | 41.7% | 48.7% |
| Female | 37.7% | 58.3% | 51.3% |
| **Ethnicity** | | | |
| Non-Hispanic/non-Latino | 83.6% | 74.1% | 84.3% |
| Hispanic/Latino | 16.4% | 25.9% | 15.7% |
| **Race** | | | |
| White, Non-Hispanic | 41.6% | 45.5% | 64.9% |
| White, Hispanic | 9.7% | 16% | 9.9% |
| Black or African American | 37% | 22% | 12.4% |
| Other Single Race | 4.5% | 13.5% | 10.3% |
| Multiple Races | 7.2% | 3.1% | 2.4% |

As Table 1 identifies, Whites make up the majority of the total US population, but also the majority of the poverty and sheltered homeless populations. Interestingly, however, Blacks are the only racial group, besides those of "multiple races," whose figure is overrepresented in

the "all sheltered homeless persons" count in relation to their figure in the "poverty population." And the difference is significant, at 15%. Blacks represent 37% of the sheltered homeless population, three times their share of the US population and nearly two times their share of the poverty population. This overrepresentation is even more pronounced in the City of Angels.

***Homelessness in the City of Los Angeles***

When W.E.B. Du Bois visited Los Angeles in 1913, he remarked: "Los Angeles is not a paradise, much as the sight of its lilies and roses might lead one at first to believe. The color line is there sharply drawn." To this day, the racial inequality persists. Blacks are significantly more overrepresented in Los Angeles homeless counts in comparison to the homeless counts of the United States as a whole.

**Table 2. City of Los Angeles Racial Breakdown of Total and Homeless Population (US Census 2010, LAHSA 2011)**

| Ethnicity/Race | % of Total Population | % of Homeless Population |
|---|---|---|
| White (non-Hispanic) | 49.8% | 22.3% |
| Hispanic/Latino | 48.5% | 24.4% |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 11.3% | 2.7% |
| African American/Black | 9.6% | 49.3% |
| American India/Alaska Native | 1% | 1.3% |

Table 2 shows the marked difference between the total Black population in the City in relation to the number of homeless Blacks. As mentioned before, the margin of difference between the number of Blacks in the entire United States and the number of Blacks who are homeless was 15%. In Los Angeles, however, this margin is a remarkable 39.7%.

**Table 3. City of Los Angeles Homeless Population by Gender (LAHSA 2011)**

| Age/Gender | % |
|---|---|
| Adult Male | 57.7% |
| Adult Female | 27.0% |
| Male Children (<18) | 7.7% |
| Female Children (<18) | 7.6% |

Table 3 addresses the gender distribution in the US homeless population. While more women are considered "poor" in the United States, far more males than females are actually homeless. The same holds true in Los Angeles. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg (2002) explains this gender disparity by claiming that poor men are more likely to be living on their own without the assistance of others; women, on the other hand, have built strong familial and community ties that assist in their prevention of becoming homeless.

**Table 4. City of Los Angeles Homeless Subpopulation Conditions (LAHSA 2011)**

| Condition | % |
|---|---|
| Persons with Mental Illness | 35% |
| Persons with Substance Abuse Problems | 31% |
| Chronically Homeless Individuals | 24% |
| Persons with Physical Disabilities | 21% |
| Veterans | 14% |
| Survivors of Domestic Violence | 10% |
| Chronically Homeless Family Members | 7% |
| Persons with AIDS/HIV | 3% |

Finally, Table 4 lists the debilitating factors that plague the homeless population of Los Angeles. Approximately one-third of the homeless suffer from substance abuse and/or mental illness issues.

***Causes of Homelessness***

A variety of social, community, and personal characteristics explain the causes of homelessness. Social and community circumstances include absence or low availability of affordable housing and the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill. Personal characteristics include persistent poverty, weak social networks, low social support, criminal activity, mental illness, and substance use disorders. Furthermore, homeless individuals are highly likely to have experienced trauma and family homelessness or housing instability during childhood and adolescence. Homeless populations are at significantly higher risk for substance dependence

(Fazel et al. 2008), with rates of drug and alcohol abuse two to eight times higher than in the general population (Robertson et al. 1997).

The dramatic cuts in funding for mental health services coupled with the "large-scale deinstitutionalization" of the mentally ill under the Reagan administration have been the primary causes of this increasingly problematic issue (Thomas 1998). Interested in reducing corporate taxes, the Reagan administration found it necessary to reduce the size of the welfare state; the provision of mental health services was transferred to the private sector (Thomas 1998). Moreover, due to budget cuts, the number of beds available to the mentally ill in public and private hospitals dropped over 40% between 1970 and 1984, despite a large increase in homelessness (Thomas 1998). The end result: thousands of mentally ill were released to the streets of Skid Row, many of whom still occupy the region until this very day.

In order to properly analyze the racial dynamics of the issue of homelessness, it is important to first take a comparative approach. Researchers have frequently noted that Latinos and Blacks share "similar risk factors" for homelessness, including higher poverty rates and lower income and educational attainment (Conroy and Heer 2003). Why, then, does this "apparent contradiction", known as the "Latino paradox", that Latinos are underrepresented in homeless samples exist (Baker 1996)?

While some attribute the disparity to a "methodological bias" – that Latinos are systematically under-sampled in surveys of the homeless – the "most plausible explanation" for this paradox, sociologist Suzan Gonzalez Baker suggests, is the "interaction of culture and institutions" (Conroy and Heer 2003). She explains that Latinos often use their "personal networks" to avoid the streets and shelters (e.g. through "doubling-up in low cost housing"), whereas Blacks use these same networks to "gain access to" and "navigate through the shelter

systems" (Conroy and Heer 2003). Sociologist Eric Klinenberg (2002) further explores the relationship between the individual, culture, and institutions in his analysis of the 1995 heat wave in Chicago, which took the lives of over 520 Chicagoans over the span of one week. These deaths were concentrated in the low-income, elderly, Black, and violent regions of the metropolis immediately adjacent to Latino quarters which suffered very few deaths.

Klinenberg presents a "cultural explanation" to this phenomenon: Latinos benefit from "strong multigenerational" and "extended family ties" that provide close contact during times of need (2002). As a result, Latinos avoided death during the heat wave because they sought the assistance of those close to them. Klinenberg suggests that Black men have a hard time receiving help from others, especially from family members. Fighting for their survival on their own would be the norm. In addition to this great sense of pride amongst the Black community and strong familial bonding in the Latino population, religious institutions greatly affected the rates of survival. The centralization of the Catholic Church in Chicago, structurally tied to and supported by the Archdiocese of Chicago, enabled great access to resources for the Latino population. The localized nature of the Black churches prevented access to resources that were necessary for aiding the suffering population in the Black Belt. Orlando Ward, a former homeless man and current Vice President of Operations at The Midnight Mission, the site of my primary data collection, identifies a greater issue with the sense of community among Blacks: "We have failed to take care of our own. It's not pleasant. The safety nets in our community are being taken away and this system is not set up to help this community" (Freeman 2004).

***Second-Class Status of Blacks***

According to legal scholar Michelle Alexander, the racial dynamics at play in the issue of homelessness do not end with Klinenberg's evaluation. She argues that there has been an

"evolution" in the United States from a racial caste system based entirely on exploitation (slavery), to one based predominantly on subordination (Jim Crow), to one defined by "marginalization" (mass incarceration) (Alexander 2010). According to a 2011 report by the U.S. Department of Justice, of the total estimated number of sentenced prisoners under state and federal jurisdiction (1,439,000), 39% are Black. It is important to recall that only 12.4% of the 2009 U.S. population was Black. Thirty-one percent of those in prison, according to this figure, were White even though Whites made up 64.9% of the 2009 US population. This is all largely due to the War on Drugs.

In 1982, President Reagan declared the War on Drugs, targeting poor Black communities. Staff members were hired to publicize crack babies and mothers in effort to build public support, especially that of White working-class citizens (Alexander 2010). This "Southern Strategy" could win over White poor Democrats to defect from the Democratic New Deal coalition by joining the Republican Party. Incidentally, crack cocaine hit the streets around this time, so Blacks continued to be targeted (Alexander 2010).

Since then, the War on Drugs has been the "vehicle" by which monumental numbers of Black men are forced into the prison system (Alexander 2010). This occurs in three distinct phases. "The Roundup" begins the process of mass incarceration. In this phase, the police sweep vast numbers of people into the criminal justice system by conducting drug operations primarily in poor communities of color (Alexander 2010). But the War on Drugs has been a money game as much as it has been a racialized attack on Blacks for the sake of politics and demonization. Federal forfeiture laws allow state and local enforcement to keep 80% of the cash, cars, and homes that they seize from drug offenders (Alexander 2010). This ensures the profitability and longevity of this drug war. Moreover, the police operate "unconstrained by constitutional rules of

procedure that once were considered inviolate," and rely on race as a "factor" in selecting whom to stop and search, despite the fact the people of color are "no more likely to be guilty of drug crimes than Whites" (Alexander 2010). And yet, in 2005, four-fifths of drug arrests were for drug possession and not for sale or violent related crimes, with Blacks being convicted for the majority of these crimes (Alexander 2010).

Next is the "period of formal control", in which the arrested are generally denied "meaningful legal representation" and are "pressured to plead guilty" regardless of whether they are or are not (Alexander 2010). The final phase is the "period of invisible punishment", the most significant phase for felons. After prisoners are released, they are subjected to a "unique set of criminal sanctions", imposed by the operation of law rather than the decisions of the sentencing judge (Alexander 2010). They operate to ensure that the vast majority of convicted offenders will "never integrate in the mainstream, White society"; they are discriminated against, legally, for the rest of their lives (Alexander 2010). Denied employment, housing, education, and public benefits, these minorities – largely Black and Hispanic – are unable to overcome these obstacles and eventually return to prison, only to be released again. They become the victims of a "closed circuit of perpetual marginality," cycling into prison, onto the streets, and back (Alexander 2010).

When drug offenders are released, they are generally returned to racially segregated ghetto communities – the places they call home. Nationwide, nearly seven out of eight people living in high-poverty urban areas are members of a minority group; Whites, even poor Whites, are thus far less likely to take shelter in the ghetto after being released from prison (Alexander 2010). For the felons of Los Angeles, mostly Black men, Skid Row becomes their home. Upon their release, they become residents of these crime and drug-infested streets.

### *The Concept of the Self*

The discussion thus far should help us understand the categorical marginalization and racialization that plague homeless individuals in the United States, particularly in Los Angeles. I am not, however, in the business of arguing whether or not Black homeless men came to be in the situation they are in purely of their own volition or solely as the result of being ushered into their condition by a system – of education, drug trade, or incarceration – geared toward their oppression. What I am captivated by is the means by which a marginalized person, such as a Black homeless man, makes meaning of and copes with their situation. To better understand these processes, I will first begin with a discussion of the self, then move onto the concept of self-presentation, and conclude with forms of identity talk used as a means of impression management.

In his seminal piece entitled *Mind, Self, and Society*, George Herbert Mead (1934), like many of his forefathers, including Kant, Descartes, and Weber, takes a dualist approach, distinguishing between the mind and the self. He argues that the two emerge through and from social interaction. He would argue, therefore, that we are the product of our environment, that social constructions inform both our thoughts and behavior. The self emerges from social interactions and it is the "experience of ourselves" as unique individuals (Mead 1934). This contrasts with the mind, which has the capacity and ability to simply interpret communication and society's symbols that are used in interactions. Therefore, while the mind becomes the processing mechanism used to make meaning of the environment and of ourselves in said environment, the self actually represents our understanding of how we are viewed by others in our society.

This level of understanding of how others view us requires a complex thought process. Mead finds that the very process of thinking is an "inner conversation" of gestures that implies the "expression" of that which one thinks to an audience (Mead 1934). Thus, thinking becomes "preparatory to social action" (Mead 1934). In that sense, if we understand the individual's thought process, we are able to fully understand their actions. We can better understand this by comparing it to Durkheim's analysis of suicide as being the product of society's influence or lack thereof on the individual. In a similar sense, Mead finds that when we think, we think socially – how we think individuals will view us and our actions while still only expressing a solely internal thought process. The verbal construction of such thoughts becomes essential in one's identity construction and condition management.

Thus, our understanding of our self is largely shaped by how we perceive others to view us. In *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, Ernest Becker (1971) expands on the concept of the self in a way that is particularly relevant to the varieties of talk I seek to discuss. Becker writes that "the humanization process is one in which we exchange a natural, animal sense of our basic worth, for a contrived, symbolic one. Then we are constantly forced to harangue others to establish who we are, because we no longer belong to ourselves. Our character has become social" (Becker 1971). From our youth, we become the product of our environment and the interactions we engage in. As a result, we come to explain our situation within the context of the individuals, institutions, and events that shape our lives. Becker (1971) also notes another critical point: "Words are basic to the formation of his self, and words are the only way he can control his environment." Thus, as we will see later on, through talk, individuals, specifically Black homeless men, can control – both internally and publicly – their environment and how their environment perceives.

### *Self-presentation*

Through talk, an individual is able to present himself or herself in the manner in which they want to be perceived. Through talk, we can become a different person, recalling stories of the time we met President Obama or of how we dropped out of Princeton to pursue a career in acting or even how our family owns a mansion in Monaco. Through talk, we are able to manage how others view us. We may tell tall tales to inflate our ego or invoke sob stories for the sake of sympathy. In whichever way we use language, we engage in a form of self-presentation.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) lays the foundation of contemporary discourse on the concepts of "self-presentation" and "impression management." He argues the importance of self-presentation in three dimensions: (1) in defining the individual's place in the social order, (2) in setting the tone and direction of social interactions, and (3) in facilitating performance of role-governed behavior (Leary 1990). Through impression management, individuals "attempt to control the impressions others form of them" and because these impressions have implications for how others "perceive, evaluate, and treat them, as well as for their own views of themselves," people often behave in ways that conform to these impressions (Leary 1990). Individuals learn from early in life that it is essential to convey a positive image of self that fits with their group's values of social desirability and admired traits; as a result, most people develop a level of skill at self-presentation (Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco 2005).

### *Forms of Identity*

In *Stigma*, Goffman (1968) describes three types of identity – "social identity," "personal identity," and "ego identity." Social identity refers to the attributes that a person is thought to possess in relation to others. Much of our social identity is based upon constructions formed by

society to classify individuals. For example, we characterize and judge individuals based upon our notions of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Personal identity, on the other hand, refers to our unique life history. "Positive marks" or "identity pegs" along with "life history items" form a unique combination that comes to be attached to the individual to form the personal identity (Goffman 1968). Our personal identity – denoted by these signs that set us apart from others – refers to the "complex and continuous profiling of who we are in relation to society that marks us as an individual" (Clarke 2008). The final form of identity presented by Goffman is "ego identity" or "felt identity." This refers to our "subjective sense" of who we are and how we exist in the world, essentially how we feel about our self (Boydell et. al 2000).

***Loss of Identity***

A number of studies have shown that homelessness is more than just not having a place to live. King et. al (2009) argue that homelessness means an effective "loss of social identity" – loss of permanent address, work, school, relationships, and even a place to call one's own. On an individual level, homelessness can even mean a loss of self. Individuals become marginalized and effectively lose their "sense of identity, self-worth, and self-efficacy" (Buckner, Bassuk, & Zima 1993). Thus, homelessness characterizes the individual's relationship to the social world, as they become delegitimized socially, politically, and economically because they fail to accumulate the acceptable form of social capital, which we often quantify in terms of possessions – family, house, car, job, clothing, etc. Moreover, this lack of capital causes these populations to be disadvantaged daily because they often find themselves lacking the "means to engage in successful social interaction" (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004). They effectively become powerless.

Erickson (1995) writes of this conflict in describing the identity issues among the marginalized individual:

> *People who make up the marginalized groups of a particular social context are more often faced with dilemmas that require them to choose between acting in accordance with their self-values or in accordance with the expectations of powerful others. These are the experiences where the meanings related to the social identity attributed by others conflict with the meanings related to one's personal identity attributed by self.*

So what are individuals who lack the resources for creating a positive self-presentation that reflects their group identity supposed to do? They must rely on talk.

***Redemptive Stories in Identity Construction***

In "Animals as Lifechangers and Lifesavers: Pets in the Redemption Narratives of Homeless People", Leslie Irvine (2013) focuses on the importance of talk, particularly storytelling, among the homeless. People construct and revise their sense of themselves by telling stories or "personal narratives," which describe "the evolution of an individual life over time and in social context" (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008). Moreover, social structure and culture shape and require particular kinds of personal narratives. These settings constitute accounts of the tellers' lived experience and simultaneously evidence of how society "speaks itself" through people's lives (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992).

A particular type of story that Irvine identifies is that which is redemptive in its theme. These redemptive stories follow a general plot line: "My life took the wrong course. I almost lost hope, but things turned out for the best" (Irvine 2013). Moreover, they depict a moral arc, with redemption entering somewhere between losing hope and turning out for the best. The theme of redemption can enter through various forms: religion, serious illness, injury, divorce, death, etc.

Irvine cites that the typical teller of a redemption story is an American adult in midlife concerned with "generativity" – an interest in leaving a positive legacy and making the world a better place (Erikson 1950). Generativity is supposedly the "central psychological and moral challenge" that adults face, especially in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. Thus, through telling their story with this type of moral arc, the homeless individual is able to find comfort and hope in their lives.

***Patterns of Identity Talk***

In "Identity Work Among the Homeless: The Verbal Construction and Avowal of Personal Identities," David Snow and Leon Anderson (1987) present three generic patterns of identity talk among the homeless of Austin, Texas: (a) distancing, (b) embracement, and (c) fictive storytelling.

(a) Distancing

Institutions may imply social identities inconsistent with their actual or desired self-conceptions. As a result, they may attempt to distance themselves from those roles, associations, and/or institutions. There are three types of distancing: (1) associational, (2) role, and (3) institutional. Since one's claim to a particular self is partly contingent on the supposed social identities of one's associates, one way to substantiate that claim, in the event that one's associates are negative evaluated, is to distance oneself from them. This is called associational distancing. Role distancing involves an active and self-conscious attempt to foster an impression of detachment to a particular social role in a given social context. Finally, institutional distancing involves derogation of the institutions that provide some element of social support.

(b) Embracement

Embracement refers to the verbal and expressive confirmation of one's acceptance of and attachment to the social identity associated with a general or specific role, a set of social

relationship, or a particular ideology. There are three types of embracement: (1) role, (2) associational, and (3) ideological. The most conspicuous kind of embracement encountered was role embracement, which typically typified itself in the acceptance of street role identities such as the "tramp" and bum." Associational embracement refers to the individual's adoption or embellishment of a personal identity in order to better associate with others as a friend or individual. Ideological embracement entails the acceptance of a set of beliefs or ideas in order for the individual to distinguish his or herself from others.

(c) Fictive Storytelling

Fictive storytelling involves the narration of stories about one's past, present, or future experiences and accomplishments and which have a fictive character to them. There were two types of fictive storytelling: (1) embellishment and (2) fantasizing. Those who employed embellishment essentially exaggerated past and present experiences with fanciful and fictitious particulars so as to assert a positive personal identity. Fantasizing, on the other hand, involves future-oriented fabrications about oneself.

## DATA AND METHODS

In conducting my research, I had two primary concerns: safety and access. Skid Row is known to be one of the most dangerous places in Los Angeles, with streets teeming with men and women with lengthy prison histories, substance abuse issues, and mental health problems. The nature of Skid Row is a recipe for danger. In addition to my safety concerns was the question of access. Once I got to Skid Row, I could mind my own business in order to be safe, but how would I get men to talk to me and for an extended period of time?

Interestingly, I had never been to Skid Row prior to developing my research project. I had been six or seven blocks from the region in the trendy areas of Downtown LA, but I never

ventured past Los Angeles Street, where the rough side of town began. However, my interest in the homeless population of Los Angeles developed miles from Skid Row in the vicinity of City Hall, where I spent a summer in high school interning in the City Attorney's Office. As I made the daily trek from the subway station to the office, I would notice the same handful of men sitting in the same spot in the public park adjacent to City Hall. I assumed them to be volatile and violent individuals, and had no clue why they had relegated themselves to a public bench instead of a job that could pay their bills and get them off the streets. I desperately desired to sit with them and ask about their condition and history, but I was simply too scared. And though I was more intrepid three years later, as I began this research project, I faced the same problem.

To combat the challenges of safety and access, I figured a partnership with a shelter or organization in the area would be the perfect solution. I contacted the Union Rescue Mission, one of the largest Christian rescue missions in Los Angeles, and The Midnight Mission, one of the largest nonreligious homeless service organizations in the region. The latter returned my call with great enthusiasm and opened their doors to my research, which I suggested would potentially help them better understand the population they served and improve the programs they offered.

In seeking to answer my research question, I selected a mixed methods approach. Relying on both convenience and snowball sampling, I interviewed 20 homeless African-American men, 10 of whom lived on the streets or in temporary shelters and 10 of whom were members of The Midnight Mission's drug and alcohol recovery program. I asked questions on a wide-range of topics including, but not limited to, family background, work experience, education, the origin of their homelessness, substance abuse, trouble with the law, and views of other homeless people. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded and transcribed

verbatim. In addition, I distributed a questionnaire to 120 men of various racial/ethnic identities in The Midnight Mission recovery program; it consisted of 22 questions regarding drug and alcohol use, incarceration, family background, and their evaluation of their current situation, among other topics. The interview instruments that I utilized can be found in the Appendix.

***Research Site***

The Midnight Mission is located in the heart of Skid Row, an approximately 50-block area east of downtown Los Angeles (LAHSA 2010). Also known as Central City East, Skid Row has been home to the largest concentration of homeless individuals in the City of Los Angeles for decades.

Founded in 1914, The Midnight Mission has a history of providing a myriad of services to the people of Skid Row and the greater Los Angeles Area. Funded completely by private donors, it joins the neighboring Los Angeles Mission and Union Rescue Mission as the most prominent homeless services organizations in Skid Row. The Midnight Mission's objective is "to work with homeless individuals and families to help remove obstacles to self-sufficiency, while ensuring that immediate needs like food, shelter, and clothing are met" (The Midnight Mission Fact Sheet 2011). The guest services, available free of charge to anyone who comes through the facility's doors, include a safe night's sleep, medical screening, GED and computer skills courses, and three meals a day. Hundreds of men, women, and families spend their entire day in The Midnight Mission – watching television in the media room or sitting, talking, or sleeping in the secured courtyard area in front of the facility's doors.

Located on the corner of the infamous San Pedro and Sixth Streets, The Midnight Mission also offers a 12-step drug and alcohol recovery program for up to 200 men. This year-long program is available free of charge to all men, who live in the facility and who have

significant access to services that include: individual case management, GED and higher education programs, health care, and life skills management counseling. This program also entails a work therapy component; each participant takes part in the maintenance of the facilities and the delivery of emergency services.

***Typical Day at the Midnight Mission***

I spent my first couple of weeks at The Midnight Mission solely as a volunteer in the kitchen. During that time, I spoke with many staff and program members to learn about the organization and Skid Row, so as to better inform the research that I was planning on pursuing. Upon my arrival at ten each morning, I found the courtyard to be full of homeless men and women who had come to stake their spot and lay down all their worldly possessions, often contained in a single plastic bag. I spent 10 to 15 minutes each morning simply examining the courtyard's inhabitants. The sites and scenes were often disturbing, from those who showed signs of mental illness by arguing with themselves to those who had foregone all personal hygiene, with grocery bags tied around their feet as makeshift shoes.

As I observed all of this, I would make mental notes of which individuals would be good candidates for my interview, making sure to avoid selecting a mentally unstable individual. Two or three participants were recruited through snowball sampling. The vast majority, however, were selected through a convenience sample: upon finding a man who I thought would be appropriate, I would casually approach him and introduce myself, ask how he was doing, give a short introduction to my project, and then ask if he would be interested in sitting down with me. Men frequently asked me if I would pay them to talk. In designing my research, I contemplated the possibility of paying subjects to sit down with me, but decided against it, thinking that I would generate too much interest and get stories of men who only wanted to talk because of the

money and not because of any genuine interest in chatting with me. Instead, in discussing an alternative with the program coordinators of The Midnight Mission and my advisor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, I decided to provide a small bag of candy to each participant.

Due to the fact that many of these men saw no value in speaking with me – I was a stranger who was not offering them anything beyond some candy – more often than not, my invitations were quickly rejected. If that occurred, however, I would simply repeat the process of recruitment until I found someone willing to chat with me. On many of the days, however, I simply gave up after being denied repeatedly. If I did find someone to sit down with, I would escort him to a corner of the cafeteria and interview him for around an hour.

After, I would go back to the kitchen to prepare for lunch. Shortly thereafter, the two lines of people from all walks of life awaited us with our trays. Through serving food, I saw how varied and different the homeless population is. Though most were Black, the diversity in gender, sexual orientation, appearance, and background was significant. The fewest number of people I helped serve was around 500, and we reached near 1,000 on two occasions. But over the course of the three months I spent in the field, I observed a dramatic fluctuation in the number of individuals and families served at lunch. At the beginning of each month, the number of meals given out is lower, sometimes half the amount given at the end of the month. This discrepancy is the result of individuals spending their monthly government assistance checks within just a couple of weeks after buying their own meals and satisfying their wants. As they get closer to the end of the month, the less money they have and the more frequently they go to The Midnight Mission for their meals. And while a monthly check in the amount of $221 may not seem like a significant amount of money, it is understandable why having these government checks may induce negligence, given that The Midnight Mission and similar homeless services

organizations, provide guests with a space to sleep free of charge, three free meals per day, and free entertainment.

### *Influence of My Identity*

It is important to discuss my role as an interviewer and the manners in which my identity may have helped or hindered my position in the interactions with these Black men. As a man who looks rather racially ambiguous, I knew that I could leverage my looks for effectively recruiting these men to chat with me and to chat openly about themselves and those in their cohort, particularly other Black men. As will be evidenced later in this paper, these men expressed a significant level of candor when speaking about their lives as Black men and how they did or did not conform to the standards and expectations of those who were also both Black and homeless and living on Skid Row. Moreover, the fact that I do not look White also allowed these men to feel comfortable speaking out and against "the White man" and the sorts of institutions he supposedly created to marginalize Blacks, namely the prison system and drug trade. Many of these men perpetuated forms of conspiracy theories about the history of marginalization of Blacks, but these men would not have felt comfortable doing so if I was White. In addition, it is likely that these men would not have spoken against fellow Blacks if I were Black. Thus, I leveraged my racial ambiguity to hear their rather unedited views on others of the same and other races.

Additionally, throughout my three months of research, I tried to do my best to look the part of as a street person. I wore a baseball cap, dressed in dark, old clothes, and kept a rather thick beard throughout the summer in order to give the illusion that I was one of them. In that way, when I approached each of these men to speak to them about their experiences, I looked somewhat like them, but also very different: neither Black nor White, nor Mexican.

***Interview as a Form of Self-Reflection***

While often unrecognized, interviews are perhaps the most illustrative forms of self-presentation. In their seminal study on the homeless of Ontario, Canada, Boydell et. al (2000) describe this phenomenon:

> *The interview situation was an opportunity for self-reflection on the part of the interviewees. It, in itself, is a hierarchical situation in which identity is being revealed…The extent of their social isolation is important to understanding the interview and the presentation of self. We can learn more about the presence of self in these kinds of interviews, particularly in the absence of close intimate networks wherein people would normally get feedback and affirmation.*

The absence of these "close intimate networks" in the lives of the homeless men I interviewed made me rather unconsciously take on the role of a psychologist. The nature of my questions engendered a significant amount of self-reflection for these men, many of whom had tumultuous lives filled with regrets. In speaking about their difficult pasts and their daily struggles, these men were able to relieve themselves of some of the burden and guilt that has filled their lives for years. For many of these men, the interview became a cathartic experience. In my discussion of the varieties of talk employed by these men, we will learn of the strategies employed in both identity construction – making sense of their marginalized self – and condition management – dealing with their painful situation.

***Coding and Analysis***

After three months in the field, I collected a total of over 25 hours of interviews of men living on Skid Row and 120 surveys of men in the drug and alcohol recovery program at The Midnight Mission. In the fall following that summer, I spent much of the semester transcribing the data. The hours of data translated into 307 single-spaced pages of transcriptions. I analyzed

the survey data by stratifying responses on the basis of race, age, and length of time in addiction and/or incarceration.

Given that my research project was designed to explain the overrepresentation of Blacks in the homeless population and to understand the debilitating factors leading to homelessness, I spent one year analyzing the data along those dimensions. I paid particular attention to issues of pride, family background, and racism in answering my research question. In preparation of writing my thesis, however, I changed my research question entirely to go beyond the factors leading to homelessness and to, instead, analyze the ways in which these men understood and coped with their marginalized identities and conditions. In my analysis of their varieties of talk, I first read a vast amount of material to understand the concepts of self, self-presentation, and identity talk. Upon doing so, I had an idea of what to look for and, upon reanalyzing the data, I found the four emergent themes of: blaming, stereotyping, distancing, and redemptive storytelling. To find a number of examples of these patterns, I coded the data using the "Control-Find" feature on Microsoft Word, searching for words that I found to be related to these four emergent varieties of talk. Those words included, but were not limited to the following: "deserve," "abuse," "self," "pride," and "God."

***Description of Sample***

The men that I interviewed truly came from all walks of life. Though the majority have lived their lives addicted to some substance and been imprisoned, Skid Row, "the new Sodom and Gomorrah," as Tyler called it, attracts men from all backgrounds – men who live happy lives, who have degrees, and who come from successful families. On Skid Row, as Frank described, you will find "every type, every class of people on Skid Row. From scientists, doctors, lawyers to people that get checks." Isaiah echoed this sentiment, attesting that "addiction

doesn't discriminate" and that the street people of Los Angeles are, in fact, "regular people." To that end, Quincy reflected on the folks who shared the streets with him, claiming that these men were simply "supposed to be the CEOs, presidents of companies, supervisors, business owners, and husbands that didn't make it."

Table 5 provides an overview of the descriptors related to my sample of homeless men:

**Table 5. Overview of Sample**

| Descriptors | Value | Range |
|---|---|---|
| Average age | 53 | 39-72 |
| Percent never married | 60% | n/a |
| Average number of kids | 2 | 0-15 |
| Percent raised in single-parent household | 45% | n/a |
| Average number of terms incarcerated | 6 | 0-25 |

As evidenced by the data in this table, these men were, on average, over 50 years and nearly half of them were raised in single-parent households. Moreover, incarceration proved to be a substantial debilitating factor in the lives of these men.

## RESULTS

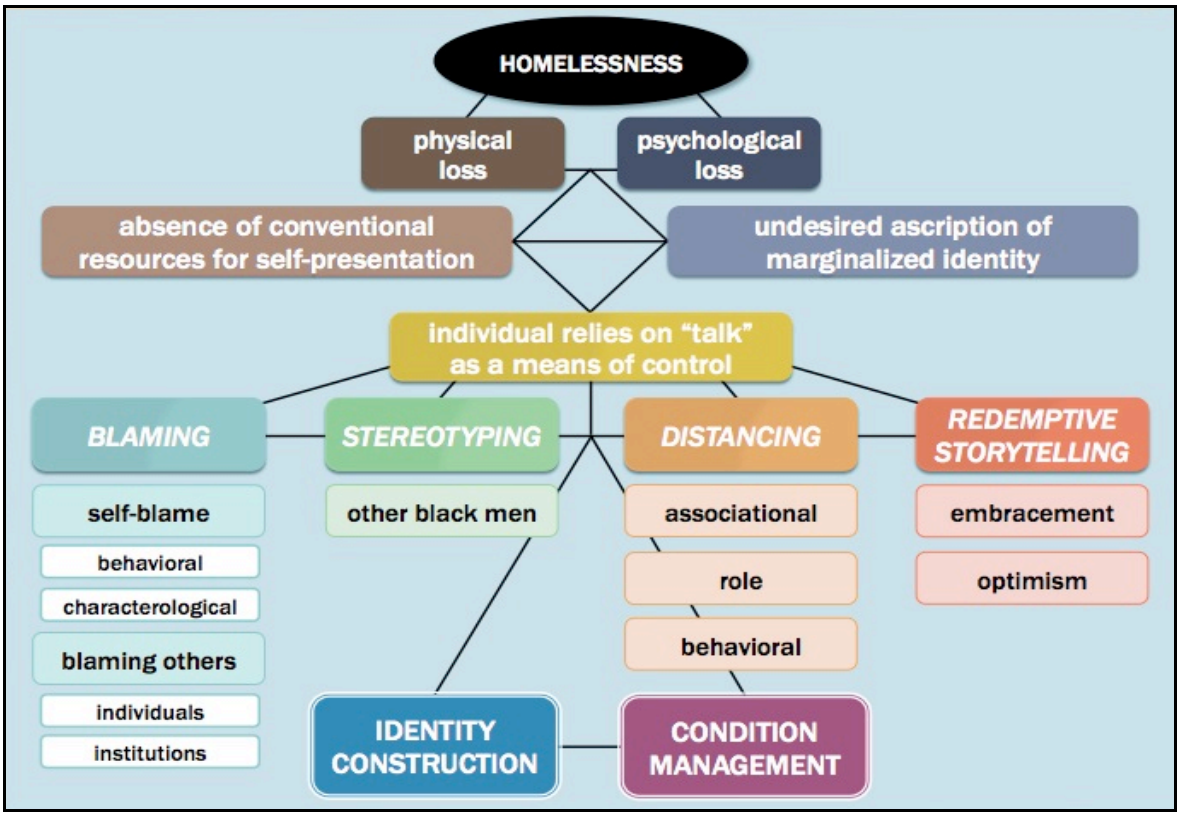
### *Emergent Conceptual Model*

I found four varieties of talk that the homeless men of Skid Row employed in dealing with the bitter reality that they faced on a daily basis: (I) blaming, (II) stereotyping, (III) distancing, and (IV) redemptive storytelling. As seen in the figure below, homelessness creates a physical loss – loss of home, job, friends, and family – and a psychological loss – loss of identity and sense of belonging to a greater social context. Suffering from these losses, these homeless men lack conventional resources for self-presentation and rely on the four forms of talk to effectively engage in identity construction and condition management. The interconnectedness of these two frames can be explained by the idea that individuals constantly engage in construction

and reconstruction of their story – who they are, how they came to be who they are, and who they might be in the future. In the absence of conventional resources for self-presentation, these individuals utilized talk to make sense of these questions.

The figure below provides a model by which to understand the data that will be presented in the section. This model is centered on the idea that "words are basic to the formation of his self, and words are the only way he can control his environment" (Becker 1971). The four patterns of talk utilized by these homeless men became the manner in which they could control their identity (marginalized and often ascribed to them) and their condition (marginalized and often devoid of hope).

**Figure 1. Emergent Conceptual Model**



### *(I) Blaming*

Given their marginalized identities and conditions, the men I interviewed often found comfort by blaming themselves or others, including individuals and institutions. In doing so, they effectively came to terms with themselves and their state of being.

(a) Self-blame

Despite the fact that these men often held all of their worldly possessions in a tattered grocery bag, in conversing with me, they often candidly blamed themselves for their current condition. They effectively localized themselves in their reality and took accountability for their actions in two different ways. In speaking about their lives, the homeless men of Los Angeles either expressed "behavioral self-blame" or "characterological self-blame."

(i) Behavioral Self-blame

Men who engaged in this form of blaming attributed blame to a particular modifiable source: their individual behavior. They expressed a shortcoming in their ability to control themselves, and found that they could have acted differently in the past in order to avoid their current condition. Three men in particular internalized their condition and blamed themselves for their current situation.

First among these was 53-year-old Marines veteran Glen. Claiming to have had a drinking career lasting in excess of 33 years and enrolled in an Alcoholics Anonymous program, Glen adopted behavioral self-blame language that aligns with the language used in many recovery programs: "When I look in the mirror…they have this thing in AA. It's a slogan: you are the problem. That blame game…'I'm Black or poor or lowly me.' No." Glen's invocation of behavioral self-blame fits with the tenets of the traditional 12-step program, particularly Step 1: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable." and

Step 5: "[We] admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." The adoption of such language in Glen's vernacular promotes the idea that he managed his condition by blaming himself for his past behaviors.

Phil, age 46, who was, at the time, one week into the 12-step recovery program at The Midnight Mission also found himself blaming his flawed behavior. When asked why he thought he was in the place that he was in at the moment, he first offered one word: "Drugs." He then quickly recanted his statement by saying:

> *I'm not even going to say drugs…I think it's my behavior my lifestyle that I cling to…I have bad behavior…I like money…I'm not trying to work no minimum wage job. I'm not gonna go out there and struggle when I know I can go out there and make 800, 900 or 700 dollars in four or five hours…I'm trying to change that: my behavior because that's what gets me in prison. That's what gets me in trouble. They ain't the drugs because I really don't do drugs. It's just the things that revolve around the game of drugs. The lifestyle.*

In this rich excerpt, Phil presents a variety of elements that are characteristic of behavioral self-blame. Firstly, he explicitly acknowledged his "bad behavior" of not really being willing to work an honest day job. Moreover, he connected behavior with outcome, realizing that his behavior took him to prison, not the drug use in and of itself. And last, but not least, Phil advanced perhaps the most critical component of this form of talk: the acknowledgement of the ability to change. He openly stated that he was working on changing his behavior, knowing that if he could alter his behavior, he could position himself in a better place in the future.

Harrison, who was born in Biloxi, Mississippi and came to Los Angeles in 2004, spent over 50 years on the streets because of his ongoing addiction to crack. While he blamed the police for bringing drugs to the community, he described his downfall as the product of his own shortcomings:

*I brought it on myself. I can't place it on nobody else. It's up to me to try to change my mentality. Because if I keep doing the same thing…I'm 72-years-old. I shouldn't be doing this shit. I should stop using. That's me. Nobody twisted my arm.*

Here, Harrison directly chastises himself for the fact that he was still addicted and on the streets despite having had decades to change his life. He took issue with his behavior and recognized that no one forced to go down the path that he did. Moreover, he moved beyond simply blaming himself to identifying what he needs to change: his mentality. In this example of behavioral self-blame, Harrison, who might have often been subjected to the judgment of his peers because of his age and addiction, does not allow the blame to extend to anyone beyond himself. In seeking to come to terms with his condition, he took ownership of it in a way that he could convince himself that he could change and control his future behavior.

The most illustrative examples of behavioral self-blame come from Barry, a 56-year-old who was born and raised in Connecticut. Barry's diverse work experience – from making music to garden work to working in sales at Nordstrom – was matched only by his "very extensive incarceration," having served four terms in California and one term in each of the following states: New Mexico, Texas, Arizona, and Louisiana. Born in a middle class family in Connecticut, Barry had been on Skid Row since 1997, spending time in and out of prison and recovery programs. Barry's candor in describing himself and his situation help highlight the means by which behavior self-blame leads to both identity construction and condition management:

*I'm very selfish. Very, very selfish. Self-centered, you know. I wanted to do what I wanted to do because I felt so deprived all that time prior…living on the streets and this and that. And I was like, "The hell, I'm gonna do what I wanna do." Then my irresponsibility came into play.*

In this example, he stresses the issues with his behavior: his selfishness and self-centeredness. His resolve to do what he just felt like doing is the product of living a marginalized life, in and out of prison. His life became a "vicious cycle," exacerbated by his "inner pride." In fact, he admitted: "I got this inner pride that I don't really like anything controlling me…but I had to be a man and face that. This stuff was controlling me. This making me do things that you don't normally do." The combination of his pride with his drug addiction furthered the flow of this "vicious cycle." His pride reinforced his drug abuse because he felt that substances could not control him. At the same time, he felt his drug abuse encouraged his prideful behavior because it obstructed his path toward recovery and enveloped him in a life mired by addiction.

These men who attributed blame to a modifiable source, namely their behavior, coped with their situation by recognizing that their actions caused them to be homeless. In the same vein, as much as their individual behavior led to their fall, they understood that it could also lead to their rise. They realized that they could turn their lives around so long as they cleaned up their behavior. By understanding and communicating this blame, these individuals engaged in effective condition management. When we look at how behavioral self-blame might influence identity construction, we may recall Goffman's three forms of identity, particularly the "ego identity." This form of identity refers to how the individual feels about himself. These men felt culpable and reprehensible, realizing that their fall was the product of their own misgivings.

(ii) Characterological Self-blame

The other emergent form of self-blame was "characterological self-blame." While those who engaged in behavioral self-blame attributed blame to a modifiable source, namely their behavior, characterological self-blame entailed attributions to a relatively non-modifiable source: their character. Whereas behavioral self-blame was control-related, this form of talk was esteem-

related, meaning that they viewed their identity as a homeless person and their condition of homelessness as the products of some force beyond their doing.

I found an allusion to this in the talk used by both Omarius and Quincy, who attributed blame to something related to their mind. When talking about his addition to alcohol and crack cocaine, 47-year-old Omarius claimed, "I abused myself because I don't know what happened. I really don't know why. But I always wanted to abuse me. Because that's all I knew…was abuse. I snapped. I guess you could call it a mental breakdown." Representative of much of the rest of interview, Omarius, in this example, fails to give a confident response, repeatedly saying "I don't know" to qualify each of his thoughts. The inexplicable source of his actions could be his mind, which he seemed to believe he does not have control over.

Quincy, age 46, further illustrated blame of the non-modifiable source, particularly the mind. The son of a famous entertainer and successful businessman, Quincy developed a deep passion for music from a young age:

> *I'm a musician for one…I became addicted and obsessed with music. So that's just a thing that I couldn't stop doing…lock myself in the room for 8 hours at a time and I was only 12 years old…So I became obsessed and addicted to that. That personality was already there…part of it. Big personality…I had an addictive personality. I'm in recovery and all that, but I am somewhat an addictive personality. Can't live a certain way.*

In describing his obsessive personality, as related to his connection to music, Quincy navigated the language of characterological blaming in coming to terms with his life condition. He took on the identity of a musician, which allowed him to find meaning in himself and manage his environment – through deflecting his issues onto something about his addictive personality and obsessive mind. Quincy then quickly connected his addictive personality, inherited through

his passion for music, as the root cause of his later addiction to drugs and alcohol: "My mind…It obsesses. It's insane and brings about a craving. A craving that doesn't go away, like an allergy…It just never will stop. It's more spiritual than anything else." In this way, Quincy seemed to justify his actions and behaviors as the product of his obsessive mind that operates largely beyond his control.

Both Omarius and Quincy seemed unable to find the true source of their behaviors, which led them to either respond with hesitance or ascribe qualified blame to themselves, particularly to something beyond their control. In engaging in this type of language of characterological self-blame, these men defined inferior elements of their identity as the product of a force beyond their own authority. In this way, they reconciled those negligent elements of their behavior. In so doing, they could more easily understand their current state of homelessness as being only partially their fault.

(b) Blaming Others

In addition to blaming themselves in these two different forms of self-blame, men also engaged in blaming others. In blaming others, they were able to mitigate their pain and regret by shifting the focus to the individuals and institutions that they feel have failed, hindered, or abandoned them.

(i) Blaming Individuals

The first form of blaming others was that of blaming individuals. In this type of talk, these men blamed the people who wronged them, including close friends and family members and certain unidentifiable individuals, such as "the White man." As we will see, these individuals identified others who at one point in time led to a transformation in their circumstances. For Phil, his aunt was the cause of his early downfall:

*I had an aunt who started using drugs and she moved in. I was put in a position I didn't want to be at, so…that's how I got caught up in the streets. Eventually, what's the saying? Birds of a feather flock together. So I was put in an environment to where I was destined to…fail. Because everybody around me was failing. Eventually they was gonna suck me in and they did*.

In this example, Phil first begins to blame his aunt for bringing drugs into his household. He then extends this amount of blame by adding that he was "put" in an environment in which he was "destined" to fail largely because everyone around him was failing and eventually, they sucked him in. While we can sympathize with Phil, his description of his failure implies somewhat of a lack of human will or control in this situation. By citing his failure as destiny, he removed the idea that where he was at the moment was the product of his own doing. By justifying his situation in this manner, Phil managed his condition in way in which he portrayed himself as the victim of some devastating wrongdoing.

Chuck also engaged in blaming other individuals. One of only two who claimed to not have an issue with substance abuse, his journey to Skid Row came about due to two particular individuals that he felt had wholly prevented him from living a successful life. Firstly, he identified his stepmother as having impeded his path toward achieving his dream of attending the New York University Tisch School of Arts to become an actor:

*You know, when you should've taken that left turn instead of that right turn? I wish I had taken the left turn. Which to me which is, if I wouldn't have listened to my stepmother at the time and done what I wanted to do instead of her talking me out of it, I might've…could've been here still, but on the other hand, I'm thinking if I had gone the way I wanted to have gone, I wouldn't have been here. I would've been successful the way I thought I should've been… I applied to NYU. I got in… I shouldn't have listened to her. So that was the right path…I should've gone left.*

In addition to blaming his stepmother, he believed that the real reason he was on Skid Row and homeless was an unidentified man who assaulted him while he worked at a newsstand in 1995:

> *At the time I was working there, I was assaulted. I was living there at the time. I woke up like 24 hours later…in the hospital. And I couldn't do my job any more. So between the physical and the psychological thing, it just sort of did me in, so to speak…it took me a long time to recover from the assault because I had been messed up physically. And it wasn't until several years later I realized that I was messed up mentally. And I've been out ever since.*

Chuck later described to me that he lived with his friend for a decade after this incident because he was no longer able to work. The county deemed him to be permanently disabled and he also claimed to be suffering from both anxiety and depression. As a result, he had been a resident of The Midnight Mission for years and became a respected member of the community.

Both Phil and Chuck identified particular individuals that truly ruined their lives and whom, they felt, forced them down a path against their own volition. That path led them to homelessness and to Skid Row. In the examples provided, these two men embodied the means by which an individual can engage in talk for the purpose of identity construction and condition management. Phil localized his identity within the context of an environment in which he was destined to fail because of bad influences. He made sense of his condition by believing that he was where he was because of it was truly his destiny. Chuck, however, used blaming others as a means to revert back to the identity he had always wanted – an actor trained at Tisch – but could not achieve because of individuals who stood in his way. And in so doing, he came to understand his condition and his subsequent disabilities as the product of his victimization.

(ii) Blaming Institutions

The second and final form of blaming of others exemplified in the language of these men was the blaming of institutions. In this context, "institutions" refers to the human organizations that enact established or standardized patterns of rule-governed behavior. The variety of institutions cited by these men included the family, education system, and government.

We see the strongest examples of blaming of institutions in Phil's talk. Forty-six-year-old Phil was born in California and raised in Oahu, Hawaii. One week into The Midnight Mission's recovery program and on parole, he described a life devastated by drugs. He moved to Los Angeles years ago to live with his grandma, whom he claimed led him to a life on the streets, as described earlier. In addition to blaming her, he spoke extensively of institutionalized racism and corrupt government, which he saw as two debilitating factors that led him and others to their current condition:

> *I'd be a cop-out to say race plays a part in the decisions I made. No. I've made the decisions I made on my own. But race…racism exists. Racism does hinder and discourage you from certain things…But I can't blame it on nobody. Because you already know it. You know it exists. You know you might not be able to get this job. You know you might not be able to go over here and do this. You know that this stops that. But, that's just the way it is. So you can't use that as a cop-out. That just means you got to strive a little harder…to advance. It's just gonna make the road a little more difficult than it is. Yes. Racism always…has a lot to play with a lot of people down here. Some can't get over the fact that it is what it is. You can't change it. It's gonna be what it is. But it has got better. I can say that. And you just got to keep on pushing, man.*

In this excerpt, we see a variety of interesting forces at play in Phil's act of blaming. At the beginning, he engages in behavioral self-blame, but rapidly shifts to blaming the institution of racism in society. In his speech, he presented a strong example of qualified blame; while he acknowledged the existence of racism, he was not keen on flat-out blaming racism for where he

was at that precise moment. He recognized that racism hindered his progress, but also shied away from fully embracing it as the root cause of his marginalized identity and state of homelessness. It is important, nonetheless, to note how Phil concluded his passage by claiming that racism was the reason for why so many people are on Skid Row. And unlike himself, those folks "can't get over the fact that it is what is." In this form of talk, Phil managed the condition of homelessness for his peers by attributing blame to racism. Inherent in his language was the concept of "distancing," which will be explored later in the paper.

Phil blamed another institution – the government – in a rather ambiguous fashion:

> *These kids can't go to school because they cutting all this school this and cutting all that. They don't have no parents because they're institutionalized and that's what the government does. What they do is take the parent, which may be the father, who tries to go out there and provides for his family because he don't have no job. It's bad. Drugs destroy the communities. And when you take the whole, the head of the household away, the kids go to the streets and get their knowledge, so they go to what they think is something that they can cling to with strength…Drugs is something they designed…They put it here. It was all for a reason. Divide and conquer. That's all it is. But whoever thought that it would happen to my kids…and that's what's starting to happen now.*

In this example, Phil attributes blame to the overall government structures for a variety of issues: cutting funding for schools, breaking up the family through incarceration, and introducing drugs into the community. In designing drugs and bringing these narcotics to Black communities, the government, he argued, was able to usher in decay to the family structure. Phil's blaming of institutions, like the other forms of blaming, enabled a powerful form of rationalization of his deplorable identity and condition. By explaining his homelessness as the

product of indestructible, impenetrable forces beyond him – racism and government – Phil, we might speculate, had the ability to come to terms with reality more easily.

In many senses, Quincy, age 46, echoed Phil's words by blaming government structures for the rampant drug use in Black neighborhoods. When asked to explain the drastic overrepresentation of Black men in the homeless population of Los Angeles, he expounded:

> *Crack cocaine…that caused a lot of homelessness…because most of the men in the program here…it's mostly Black men…But I know it has a lot to do with…government structures that are not ethical…We have a very corrupt government. And there's a lot of hatred probably from the past. Control, hatred, genocide, ethnic cleansing-type thing.*

Like Phil, Quincy took issue with the unethical and corrupt nature of government because of its role in the propagation of the drug trade in Black communities. However, he takes this blame one step further in the last line, extending blame to the inherent hatred toward Blacks in government structures.

Omarius also took issue with the discriminatory government structures in place:

> *I've seen some things; you wake up: death. I've seen people get their throats sliced…Why does our government let this happen? They knew about the homelessness in the United States. Why they kept pushing them back? Because the only thing we are to them is just a number. And then, when you die, you're just a box. It's easy.*

This riveting illustration portrays the US government as worthy of blame; death is rampant on Skid Row and yet, Omarius feels that no one took initiative to make a positive transformation within the community. He dealt with the horrific nature of Skid Row, by coming to the conclusion that his negligent government has abandoned him. In taking such an approach,

he implied that where he ended up in life was the result of being a part of a society governed by an inherently biased system of oppression.

Isaiah, however, presented an antithetical subject in his blaming. Hailing from Compton, California, this 54-year-old former University of Southern California walk-on football player and former bodyguard for rapper Dr. Dre's producer ascribed blame to the African tribal governments:

> *[Race] made me susceptible…Africa sold us to America. Our government sold us. We became captive slaves to Americans, but really, we were sold by our own people. We cannot blame the White man. We sold ourselves. Africans sold ourselves. They sold us. I can't blame somebody White. A White didn't sell me. A Black sold me.*

In this provocative example of blaming, Isaiah claims that his race had negatively affected his life due to the institutionalization of slavery centuries ago. While Phil, Quincy, and Omarius all blamed the unethical American government, run by Whites, for their marginalization, Isaiah found it appropriate to blame the corrupt African governments, run by his ancestors, for the discrimination and susceptibility he felt in his current condition.

In blaming other individuals and institutions, these men were able to construct their identities as the product of abusive families, denigrated neighborhoods, and communities corrupted by racist governmental forces. By attributing blame to individuals and institutions that deeply affected their lives in a negative fashion, they used talk as a means for garnering sympathy and understanding for their identities as homeless men, felons, and parolees. In addition, by blaming others, these men effectively managed their condition of homelessness by explaining its causes as exogenous to themselves and out of their control. By pushing the blame

away from themselves, they could more easily bear the pain of living on the streets or in a recovery program, knowing that where they were was no fault of their own.

***(II) Stereotyping***

(a) Stereotyping other Black men

The second form of talk, stereotyping, may seem particularly straightforward. In actuality, however, this form of talk provides a complex understanding of the individual and how they work to feel better about themselves and their state of being. Interestingly, respondents very frequently engaged in stereotyping other Black men, particularly when asked why there is an overrepresentation of Black men in the homeless population. They used the same sort of language that is used by outsiders to possibly rationalize the great number of Black homeless men. While this was a common strategy used by most of the men, there were very few instances in which any of them actually stereotyped others, particularly the White, Latino, and Asian fellow community members. Here, once again, my identity may have affected our interactions in a way that enabled them to feel comfortable talking about their race, knowing that I do not look like one of their own.

The variety of stereotypes that these men spoke of fell along the lines of two different, but somewhat related stereotypes. For illustrative purposes, I present these two stereotypes as the "Gangbanger Druggie" and the "Negligent Black." Isaiah, the former college football player who grew up in nearby Compton had been exposed to this Los Angeles Black community since he was a child and yet, he described its members by saying: "They do the same shit every day. Every damn day…smoking dope and having sex." Here, Isaiah employed two stereotypes in his observation: that Blacks are drug users and abusers and sexually active. Jake, a 42-year-old born in Shaker Heights, Ohio, echoed this notion: "A lot of Black men get in gangs and drugs and

stuff and they don't take their education seriously." In addition to referring to gangs and drugs, Jake brings up an important point related to delinquency, in terms of education, among the Black population that will be furthered in the discussion of the second type of stereotype: the "Negligent Black." Nathan offers a similar sentiment when playing into common stereotypes: "Most Black men have the decision to make fucked up choices in life. Instead of going to school and trying to get a job, they want to…getting in with the in-crowd, hanging out with gang members, selling dope, selling weed, doing things to shortcuts." In this example of stereotyping, Nathan not only identifies the image of the "Gangbanger Druggie," but also begins to introduce the "Negligent Black," who fails to pursue his education and/or have a job.

The chief element of the "Negligent Black" stereotype is the notion that Blacks are lazy. Looking from the outside in, we can often very easily see a homeless person sitting on a park bench or begging at an intersection and assume that they are being lazy and would rather beg than get an honest job. This idea that negligence and laziness are characteristic of Blacks became salient in a number of instances during the interviews. When pressed to explain why the rate of homelessness among Black men is significantly higher than that among men of other races, Ralphie argued that "there's other races really trying to do something for themselves…But mostly Blacks, they've just given up." Seventy-two-year-old Harrison furthered this discussion by offering concrete examples related to how Blacks pass on the opportunity for employment even when good options are available:

> *The Blacks, they ain't gonna try. McDonalds, Popeyes, and Church's. See all them Downtown, Black workers at all them. They pay eight-something an hour…They pay you and they pay you proper. But here, they wouldn't work at no McDonalds, no Popeyes. "I ain't gonna work at no McDonalds. I ain't gonna work at no Popeyes." Why not? You make some nice money there.*

Harrison later spoke of how other options for employment could be working in a hotel or even in maintenance positions. He took issue with the fact that these opportunities were available and that other men could be so brash as to become selective when it came to employment, even when it meant getting a job that paid well.

Thirty-nine-year-old Alex presented strong stereotypes about other Black men throughout the interview. Born and raised in LA, he moved to Skid Row when his grandmother, with whom he lived with for years, passed away. He admitted to serving over 25 terms in the county jail, and that when not incarcerated, he made sure to drink daily. His addiction seemed to have been so strong that he described his waking hours of solely consisting of recycling cans and bottles simply so that he could purchase cigarettes and beer. He repeated the process throughout the day; he gathered enough recyclables to buy him drugs and alcohol to sustain him for a short amount of time before he went back to recycling. Alex's unique story presents insight into why he seemed so keen on describing Blacks using the "Negligent Black" stereotype: "What it all comes down to: they lazy. Once you get down here, you get used to jumping from mission to mission. And just wait for your check. 'I ain't gonna sweep no street.' So you do nothing." Additionally, he embraced some of this laziness by claiming: "We like to sit back and don't do shit and just wait on the check. And drink a beer." Alex's casual mention of "the check" refers to the forms of government assistance, which many of his cohorts rely on for survival: food stamps, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability (SSD), and General Relief (GR). These men often mentioned the monthly check in the amount of $221, as described earlier, which they essentially spent for their own leisure and pleasure.

Finally, Alex raised a fascinating point that complicates the "Negligent Black" stereotype:

*They say, "The White man…he ain't gonna let me work because I'm Black." You ain't even went and applied. "Well, the White dude don't have no degrees, but I do, but they still hired him." That's just who they wanted to hire. Maybe there's something else about him that they wanted from him but that you didn't have. So you think that just because you Black and you got all these degrees, you're supposed to get it. It's like when affirmative action was…"I'm supposed to get the job." Ain't nobody supposed to hire you. So, go to the next one.*

In this example, we come to understand an essential facet of the "Negligent Black" stereotype, that Blacks, according to Alex, tend to make excuses for their failures by blaming White people.

In many ways, stereotyping resembles a strong form of talk that these men used in both identity construction and condition management. By stereotyping other Blacks, these men were able to feel a sense of self-satisfaction and self-righteousness because, by virtue of their language of stereotypes, they were actively distancing themselves in a way that constructed their identity as counter to the "stereotypical" Black man. And this sense of satisfaction potentially helped alleviate the pains of their condition.

***(III) Distancing***

The men of Skid Row engaged in three forms of distancing in their talk: a) associational, b) role, and c) behavioral. In their seminal work on identity talk among the street people of Austin, Texas, Snow and Anderson (1987) identified associational and role distancing as prevalent patterns in their analysis. The men I spoke with also used these two types of talk and frequently engaged in behavioral distancing, an emergent form of distancing that will be discussed later.

(a) Associational Distancing

Through associational distancing, the individual uses talk to separate themselves from others who share their particular social context. By distancing themselves from peers who are also homeless, Black, and on Skid Row, these men defined their identities as different and somewhat in conflict with those exemplified in the lives and behaviors of the men around them. Surprisingly, associational distancing turned out to be one of the most prevalent forms of talk utilized by these men.

While very much a part of the homeless community, these men felt comfortable in shunning the men around them and pointing out their flaws. In the words of Isaiah, "something's wrong with them…they stuck." He went on to ostracize the men who never pursued an education, as he had done, having graduated from the University of Southern California:

> *I was educated. There's no excuse. America offers too many colleges and trade schools. Period. There's no reason why anybody, any race can't have an education. America provides. They blame their drug addiction on society. They can't. I got an education. I don't see why they can't. They got stuck. I don't feel sorry for them. You got to want help to get help. They do the same shit every day. Every damn day. I don't think it's right.*

In this passage, Isaiah fails to sympathize with those who never pursued schooling after high school and eschews the notion that society plays a role in the marginalization of the individual. He separates himself entirely by repeatedly saying "they" instead of "we" in his references to the fellow homeless of Los Angeles. Isaiah's repeated self-exclusion from the homeless community in his language provides us with a better understanding of how he viewed himself and his condition. Through dislocating himself from the community, he presented himself as an individual that should not be labeled with the same identity markers that are typically ascribed to the homeless. In so doing, he might have painted his situation in his mind to

be more favorable than that of his peers because of his education and his acceptance of the notion that his condition was not the product of his society.

Phil and Chuck sought to distance themselves from their fellow black homeless men by proposing that these individuals had pride issues which prevented them from living up to their potential in leading a life off of the streets. Phil's description of the men of Skid Row provides insight on the means by which associational distancing enables one to construct their story to be in contrast to those who also lead marginalized lives:

> *Some of them content. Some of them don't want to do nothing with their lives. Some of them are satisfied sleeping on the streets. It ain't easy to make change, man. It ain't easy to come into a place, follow some directions, and….Some of them won't let that pride go. Some of them like the misery. They feel that's the only way that they can survive.*

Here, Phil assumes that many of his peers have embraced and potentially even begun to find satisfaction in their lives on the streets. As a member of The Midnight Mission's recovery program at the time of his interview, he demonstrated that he was different from "them" because he let his pride go and showed his ability to embrace change. Chuck, age 56, presented a similar narrative:

> *If they just like humbled themselves and take the help that's given them or think about it first…as opposed to, "Oh, I don't do that." "You can't make me do that." "I'll do it myself." But you see, a lot of things you can't do yourself. You've got to realize that you can't do it all yourself. So, drop that. And just go like, "Excuse me, I need some help." See the bigger picture, you know. If you can't do it yourself or you need help to do it, don't keep trying to rely on yourself to do it. Because it'll just take you longer to get there. You could've been there five days ago as opposed to like waiting six months.*

Chuck, like Phil, found it necessary for his peers to be willing to ask for and accept help. The pride that "they" displayed only hindered their progress. He continued on to describe how laziness within the community tremendously exacerbated the issues:

> *A lot of them are just damn lazy. I know there's a lot of young people here…What the hell are you doing down here? Go to school. Why don't you have job? Why the hell are you sitting in the front of the courtyard, just hanging out on the street? What the hell is wrong with you people? When I was your age, I had an apartment, a car, and I was working. What is wrong with you people? "Oh, oh. I'll do it tomorrow."…They don't want to do anything and this is the life. I mean, how can you think is the life when you're 22? This ain't it. Get a job. Go work somewhere. Get off your butt.*

By constantly using the pronouns "they" and "them," both Chuck and Phil communicated that they were different, that their story was different, and that their future would be different. By criticizing their peers for their pride and laziness and by communicating their own openness to accepting help, they painted themselves as individuals who could avoid the negative consequences teeming in the lives of those who they were associated with. In so doing, both Chuck and Phil constructed positive identities and positive conditions for themselves, in striking contrast with those around them.

Ralphie, age 60, distanced himself from his associates on the grounds that he was raised differently, having had parents who provided him with a proper upbringing:

> *Some of them come from poor homes. Some of them don't even know their parents. But in my opinion, I think it's just the way they're brought up. Because I know I was brought up the right way…that's why I'm trying to do what's right.*

Here, Ralphie states that parenting, or rather a lack of parenting, can cause the individual to lose their way and eventually end up down on Skid Row. Instead of claiming an origin with

the same negative upbringing, he asserted that it is an issue that "they" face. Through using this pronoun he distinguished between himself and those around him. He took this distancing one step further by claiming that his parents brought him up in the "right" way to do what was "right." In claiming to have a "right" upbringing different from others, he implied that others had improper parenting.

Barry presented perhaps the strongest form of associational distancing, utilizing language that displayed a level of detestation of the men who he involuntarily became associated with by virtue of his being Black and homeless:

> *I'm the type of Black…I'm not ghettoish, as you could say. I have culture: my background, because of my parents, mostly my mom and grandma. We have always been thought as upper middle class. So dealing with my people on this level is very hard for me. It was really traumatic. Just the part I wasn't ready for.*

Barry, born and raised in Connecticut to an upper-middle-class family, spoke in a rather problematic manner due to the fact that he not only played into the stereotype of Blacks being "ghettoish," but also proclaimed himself to be on higher ground than his fellow homeless men with whom he had a "traumatic" experience dealing with.

As evidenced by these passages, a number of men engaged in associational distancing in order to construct their identities and conditions as different from those characteristic of the men around them. By promoting stereotypes of Black men and by inflating their egos through describing themselves as different and in stark contrast to those who occupied the space with them, these individuals placed themselves in a state of psychological paradise; through asserting their differences, these men could feel better about their identities and conditions. They essentially constructed identities for themselves that did not fit with the typical markers associated with the homeless – they claimed to not be lazy, to not be prideful, to not be opposed

to receiving help. Ascribing laziness and pride to their peers, however, they came to understand the rampant homelessness in their community as the product of individuals' character flaws. Since they identified the ways in which they were different from their peers, however, they positioned themselves to possibly end up with different conditions and different futures.

(b) Role Distancing

Another form of distancing entailed men verbally distancing themselves from their current condition of homelessness, invoking a sort of narrative that downplayed their current situation and marginalized identities. Omarius, for example, diminished the fact that he was in a recovery program by saying: "I'm just here because I got to get off parole. Once I get off, I'm gone." His language demonstrated that he was not at the program because he felt something was wrong with him. Rather, his enrollment was the product of his desire to remove himself from the limitations imposed on him due to his parole. In this way, he distanced himself from the identity of the program participant and the condition of being in recovery.

Ralphie, however, presented an opposing view for why he joined the recovery program at The Midnight Mission:

> *I came because I wanted, to be honest with you. I was tired. And they feed you pretty good. Clean clothes. Take a shower. It's not all about money…because I was getting GR. I could do better on the streets without GR than being in here. But I said to myself, "I'll come up here and do better for myself."*

In this passage, Ralphie describes being in a recovery program as a voluntary, conscious decision. By claiming that he could survive on the streets without General Relief assistance, he placed himself in a role at odds with the typical role of a homeless person. For him, his survival as a homeless person was not contingent upon government assistance. Rather, he found that he could be without a home and without assistance and not just survive, but succeed. In this way, he

made his identity as a homeless man and his own homelessness to be more favorable because of his willingness to "do better" for himself by pursuing the current route he was on.

Finally, Barry began his description of his current condition by engaging in associational distancing, and then elevating his status through role distancing:

> *People come down here and they already…how you say…emotionally distraught, without housing for whatever reason…A lot of these guys, in my opinion, they don't really want the help. They on SSD and they're content to live with that check every month. It's really sad. I could get on it, but I don't want it. I'd rather work. And I think that's pretty much the problem out here. But then you have a decent…enough people that, like myself, if they just had that help, they'd get off here.*

Barry's use of role distancing manifested itself in a way similar to Ralphie's. He, too, rejected the concept of accepting government assistance, particularly in the form of SSD (Social Security Disability). Moreover, instead of embracing the role of being homeless and out of work, he spoke of his desire to work and make a living for himself. This desire, he argued, made him "decent." While embracing his condition, Barry distanced himself from the complete social role of a homeless individual, which he defined as asking for and taking handouts from the government. By labeling himself among the crowd of "decent" individuals, he also disassociated himself from the members of his community.

Through their language, Omarius, Ralphie, and Barry illustrated the power of role distancing in identity construction and condition management. These men felt they occupied a different space within their social context because of the reasons for their homelessness and for their conscious decisions to do things on their own, rather than by receiving help. In describing the rationale for their current state and their embracement of their condition, they found comfort

and solace in their situation, but were unwilling to wholly accept the stigmatized role of the homeless.

(c) Behavioral Distancing

The final form of blaming that emerged in my analysis was related to the subjects' past behavior. This pattern, though not identified by Snow and Anderson as a form of distancing in their discussion of identity talk, was a common theme in the narratives presented by the Black homeless men of Los Angeles' Skid Row. Through engaging in behavioral distancing, these men were able to remove themselves from the types of actions that had brought them to Skid Row and to their current life cycle of incarceration and substance abuse.

Several men, in reflecting on their lives, found certain past behaviors and decisions that they chose to distance themselves from, so as to place themselves in a more favorable position. As Omarius recalled of his experiences in gang violence and drub abuse, he noted: "I was never the kind of guy I was supposed to have been." He regretted not pursuing his education beyond community college, which he saw as the means by which he could have advanced to a more acceptable role in society. Alex presented a more complicated form of behavioral distancing:

> *If I could turn the clock back, I would. Because when I first started drinking, I'd maybe drink a 30-ounce on the weekend with my girl and get a couple of movies. But it just progressed and progressed and now…if I ain't got none I gotta go and recycle some. I just came back from the recycling center and now I'm gonna make another bag. But I got a dollar, so I'm gonna get me another one and that'll give me the boost to keep on walking.*

In one sense, he removed himself from his past behaviors by claiming that if he could go back in time, he would do things differently. Through such language, he suggested that he regretted his past drinking habits, which led him to his current state of addiction. Because of his

past decisions, he was not able to hold down a proper job, deciding to spend his days on the streets and recycling items to make enough money to buy himself a beer. Through behavioral distancing, Alex presented himself as the product of prior bad habits and decisions. He took this approach, not for the purpose of creating a positive image of himself or his condition, but for the sake of accommodating for and rationalizing his current state of being – as a homeless addict.

Nathan, age 48, had always wanted to be in the public eye, as a model or actor, but got sidetracked along the way. Born in Dallas and raised in Los Angeles, he ended up studying building maintenance at a trade school, and then drove local buses. His alcohol abuse began when he was sixteen, and he started using marijuana a couple of years later. Drugs gave him a sense of euphoria and escape that caused him to be severely addicted and to repeatedly relapse after months at a variety of recovery programs. As he reflected on this turbulent past he was filled with remorse:

> *I definitely did not want to be what I am now. I had dreams. A lot of dreams. I wanted to be a model at first. I kinda liked modeling and then I got sidetracked off of that…I wanted to get in the public eye. I wanted to be famous in that area…actors. I was kinda looking towards that way. But then I quickly got out of that. Reality set in real quick. I never really pursued it.*

For Nathan, reality, namely his addiction, prevented him from pursuing his dream career in acting. In this excerpt, he clearly rejectes those past decisions that had brought him to a place where his aspirations became obsolete.

Finally, Harrison presented one of the most vivid examples of behavioral distancing in the manner that he retold his story with an element of rejection of his past behaviors:

> *I just left the place I was at. I was paying $600. I got tired of paying. So I came to that restaurant there when I should've thought first and gotten another place. But I didn't. I came outside and that caused me to be in the situation I am. Because*

*then you start being using this and being around this, and you start doing the same thing everybody else do. It wasn't right, but I still did it.*

In this example, Harrison distances himself from his foolish decision to not pay rent. His irrational behavior led him to leave the comfort of his home for the "outside," the danger of the streets. This transition to the streets caused him to emulate the behavior and identity of the homeless, which he acknowledged was not "right." Despite his awareness of the immorality of such behavior, he admitted that he engaged in and created a habit of living off of the streets.

Omarius, Alex, Nathan, and Harrison epitomized the processes of identity construction and condition management through behavioral distancing. These men, in a variety of ways, distanced themselves from their past behaviors, oftentimes labeling them as improper and misguided. In so doing, they were able to assert that they were on the path toward behaving differently, and thereby had taken on a new identity or, at least, a reformed identity. In their separation from the past behaviors that had led them to homelessness and to Skid Row, these men made themselves out to be reconstructed individuals who could, by refraining from the behaviors that led them to their current state, actually bring themselves up and off of the streets.

***(IV) Redemptive Storytelling***

Finally, several men engaged in redemptive storytelling. As discussed earlier, such storytelling depicts a "moral arc," with redemption entering somewhere between losing hope and it all turning out for the best. McAdams (2001) suggests that those who engage in redemption narratives feel "endowed with an essentially good self, guided by upstanding principles. This prompts him or her to see positive outcomes even from negative events" (Irvine 2013).

In engaging in redemptive storytelling, Omarius expressed his muddled detestation for his current condition, coupled with his vision for the future:

*I've been here so long. This is my family. My adopted family. This is the only family I know…When I get out of prison, I don't have anywhere to go to. Guess where I go? Back down to these shelters. I hate shelters. I hate this mission. I'm just here because I got to get off parole. Once I get off, I'm gone. Where I'm going, I know I'm not gonna lay my head on the street…so that means I got to do something different.*

In this reflection, Omarius conveys strong candor, particularly in his admittance to the fact that he joined the recovery program only to be on his way to getting off of parole. While this might take away from our belief that he might change his ways due to genuine desire, his language demonstrated convincing determination to "do something different" that would actually get him off of the streets.

Phil also utilized redemptive storytelling in his identity construction and condition management. In this excerpt, Phil speaks of how the altered nature of the streets served as rationale for transforming his life:

*The streets have dramatically changed as far as making money, so you can't [hustle] no more because the police is basically running the streets now…Since that has changed, I think I want to change as well because I'm tired of doing time…Live life on life's terms, get an honest job, and do the right things you need to do to make it because…if you on the wrong side of the fence, eventually you're gonna get caught. So I made a conscious decision this time around that I would try to do things the right way, whether I have to struggle in the beginning or not, or come to these types of places like this, I'm willing to do what it takes…There's nothing that's going to stop me from going to school and doing what I said I was going to do this time because I'm set on it. I've been planning it too long and I have made all these steps to do what I said I was going to do. And I've been doing them. First time I reported to my parole officer off the top. First time I ever went to the requirements of the things to do. And I'm about to get off parole…I'm doing*

*everything that I set up to do. And I have been doing them. I've been making the steps.*

In many ways, this passage typifies Phil's invocation of redemptive storytelling during the interview. He began by recognizing the faults of his behavior, and then moved on to describe the ways in which he needed to change his behavior "to do things the right way." He then concluded by communicating the steps he had already taken toward ensuring his idealized version of the future became reality.

Among those who I spoke with, Luke, age 65, used language that best embodied redemptive storytelling. Diagnosed as "paranoid schizophrenic," Luke served over 15 years in and out of prison for armed robbery and theft because of his need to keep financing his heroin, alcohol, and crack addiction. As a Level Two member of The Midnight Mission, he spoke of his desire to come clean of his addictions for the sake of his five kids from three previous marriages. In this example, he describes an idealized life trajectory for himself and his peers:

*I'm too tired and too old to be running back and forth out there on the street…I need to get my life in order. I'm gonna take advantage of this trip and if God's willing, I'll get through this here. And you know, be able to reach out and help somebody else…Some of them is mentally disturbed. Some of them is on the drugs, like the way I was…they don't know how to get up out of the situation that they're in…They have to get to the point that they're tired of being out there. [I want] to show them that there is a light at the end of that dark tunnel that they're travelling through…I pray for Him to help them. Because He's helping me. And there's a lot of them out there that need the same thing that I do.*

Luke's narrative fits with the "redemption stories" which Leslie Irvine (2013) argues, fall along a general plot of: "My life took the wrong course. I almost lost hope, but things turned out for the best." As illustrated in this passage, Luke comes to terms with reality: he realized his

mistakes, proclaimed his need for help, and credited God as the means by which he could get out of his situation.

Throughout our conversation, Luke constantly referred to the greater purpose God had given him and reflected on his previous time at The Midnight Mission in a positive light. He realized and embraced the implications of his past decisions and saw the world differently years later. Through deep reflection in his storytelling, he demonstrated how he learned from his mistakes and spoke of his desire to mentor other Black homeless men and instill in them the same level of optimism he described when sharing with me. In addition to managing his condition in this way, Luke also constructed his identity by separating himself from the rest of the men on the street, to the point that he felt he could be in a position to mentor and guide them in making better life decisions:

> *I suffered a lot…being shot, running around, I've been stabbed. That kind of stuff…I wouldn't want to repeat that. The drug use is just going in-out of prison. I wouldn't want to repeat that, but it's an experience that God…it was there. It happened. And, as far as I'm concerned, it happened for a purpose. Because I'm still here. Maybe because of the circumstances, I shouldn't be here after all that I went through. But that's why I feel that He has a purpose for me. Hopefully it will be fulfilled.*

In this example, Luke expresses a tremendous amount of optimism regarding his situation, believing in a greater purpose for his life. He demonstrated the "moral arc" described by Irvine, rejecting his past decisions, stating how he would act differently in the future, and finally, how he would use his turbulent past for the good of others, according to God's will. And most importantly, he understood that the first step toward dealing with his condition would be embracement: "I have to forgive my actions, forgive myself to be able to move on."

Arguably the most powerful form of talk used by the Black homeless men of Los Angeles' Skid Row, redemptive storytelling served as the means by which these individuals could assert an idealized identity and claim a hopeful future condition. By expressing candor in their narrative through embracing both their past and present and foretelling their future with optimism, these men effectively controlled their identities as homeless men, as felons, as parolees. Moreover, redemptive storytelling provided them the opportunity to connect with a future in which they could successfully follow a path that would lead them toward reaching their dreams. And through telling their narratives with an element of redemption, they could come to terms with reality by recognizing that, while their past may have been detrimental and negative, they could be on the rise through effectively navigating their lives with optimism and a heightened sense of morality. Finally, through bringing God or a Higher Power into the picture, these men were able to accept the possibility of redemption, given that they felt the presence of a force beyond them that could aide them in achieving success. The addition of a deity to the story allowed them the option of believing that a fruitful future could be possible, so long as they did not rely on their own human will, but of the will of God as well.

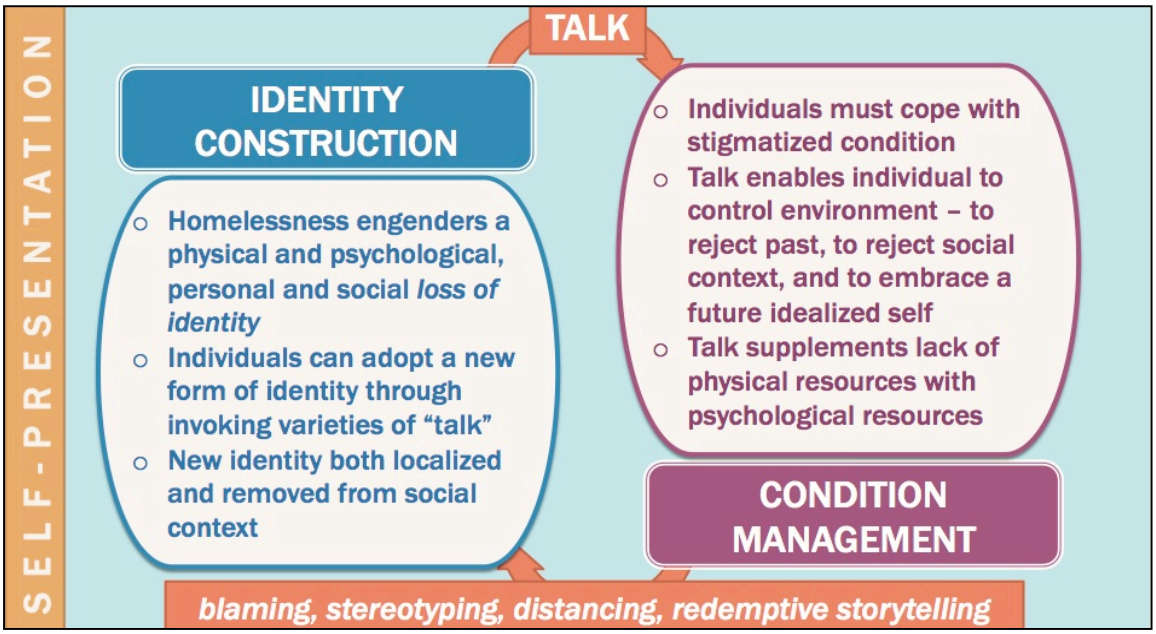
## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Homelessness has been studied for generations in a variety of disciplines. My approach, rooted in both sociology and psychology, has enabled me to examine homelessness as both a physical and psychological loss – a loss of one's job, home, and family in addition to a loss of identity and of one's role in a particular social context. Many scholars have studied this resultant form of marginalization through the theoretical lens of "self-presentation" informed by Goffman and the contemporary framework of "identity talk" advanced by Snow and Anderson. In

discussing the question of how the individual deals with physical and psychological losses, I have proposed that the individual relies on talk as a form of control – over their identity construction and condition management. By examining self-presentation through the dualist approach of identity construction and condition management, I expand the discussion to more than just identity. Thus, my work fits with, but also goes beyond, the dialogue in existence between two seminal pieces on identity talk written by Snow and Anderson (1987) and Leslie Irvine (2013).

Snow and Anderson inspired my use of "distancing" as a form of talk, while Irvine informed my use of "redemptive storytelling." By moving beyond identity construction through adding the idea of condition management to the discussion, we get a better sense of how the individual navigates both the physical and psychological losses that they must experience because of their homelessness. Identity talk may be one way of coping with their psychological loss, but in order to get a better picture of how they deal with their physical loss – their loss of family, home, and job, we also need to examine the ways in which they use talk in condition management. Therefore, the work I have presented helps provide a more holistic understanding of the ways in which marginalized individuals, such as the Black homeless men of Los Angeles' Skid Row make sense of themselves and their condition. The relationship of these two frames in understanding self-presentation can be summarized in the figure below:

**Figure 2. Summary of Findings**




As illustrated in this figure, talk – particularly blaming, stereotyping, distancing, and redemptive storytelling – becomes the means by which the homeless individual engages in self-presentation. However, self-presentation must be understood as an interconnected process of identity construction and condition management facilitated effectively through talk.

***Strengths and Limitations***

In designing my research project, I took an ambitious approach given that I had never previously been involved in research. But despite being an amateur researcher, I fortunately collected a robust set of both qualitative and quantitative data. While in the field, I felt I had to take advantage of the opportunity to create something meaningful, so I challenged myself to keep gathering data to the point of completing 20 interviews. However, had I had more time during the summer of 2011, I certainly could have conducted many more.

On the other hand, however, I never had the intent on studying identity construction and condition management among the homeless. I sought only to understand both the debilitating factors leading to these men's homelessness and the overrepresentation of Blacks in the Los

Angeles homeless population. As such, my interview guide was not designed for the purpose of finding more about the varieties of talk and verbal strategies that these marginalized individuals used in making sense of themselves and their situation. If I were to redo this study, I would focus on questions along the lines of: "How would you describe yourself?" "In what ways are you different and/or similar to those around you?" "How do you feel about where you are today?" "In what ways do you cope with your homelessness?" Asking these sorts of questions might have provided explicit illustrations of both identity construction and condition management. Nonetheless, the richness of my qualitative data enabled me to consider the question of the means by which these men utilized talk to construct their identity and manage their condition.

***Future Research***

Future studies that examine talk among marginalized individuals – perhaps through the frames of identity construction and condition management – have a fantastic opportunity to analyze not only the emergent patterns, but also the differences among those who used them. Earlier in this paper, I alluded to the language used in the 12-step recovery programs, which many of the men who I interviewed had experience with, either at that precise moment or previously. It would have been fascinating to take a comparative approach in analyzing the patterns used by these men. For example, it may have been possible to note differences in the varieties of talk used among those who were in the recovery program as opposed to those who were living on the streets. Moreover, if this sample had consisted of individuals from a variety of races, it would have been intriguing to examine not only the potential differences in their use of blaming, stereotyping, distancing, and redemptive storytelling, but also the ways in which their experiences of socialization may have influenced the ways in which they constructed their identities and managed their condition. Nonetheless, in analyzing these concepts of identity

construction and condition management in the present study, we have been able to better understand the marginalized individual, how they view themselves and their state of being, and most importantly, how we can be a source of help, comfort, and healing to them.

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## APPENDIX

### *Recruitment via Personal Interaction Script*

My name is Michael Habashi and I am an undergraduate student at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. I am here volunteering at The Midnight Mission for the summer. I am also interested in finding out more about poverty and homelessness in Los Angeles. Therefore, completely separate from being a volunteer, I am doing some research about homelessness in this area.

If you are willing, I would like to ask you some questions about your background including personal questions about your life experiences. This interview should take around 30 – 45 minutes or can occur over multiple meetings while I'm here at The Midnight Mission.

### *Oral Consent Script*

My name is Michael Habashi and I am an undergraduate student at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. I am here volunteering at The Midnight Mission for the summer. I am also interested in finding out more about poverty and homelessness in Los Angeles. Therefore, completely separate from being a volunteer, I am doing some research about homelessness in this area.

If you are willing, I would like to ask you some questions about your background including personal questions about your life experiences. This interview should take around 30 – 45 minutes or can occur over multiple meetings while I'm here at The Midnight Mission.
If some of the questions seem too personal, you do not need to answer them. You are free to not answer any of the questions and to end this interview at any time. If you end the interview, I will not use any of the data I have collected from you unless you say I can. If you decide to talk or not to talk with me for my research project, this will have no effect on your care here at The Midnight Mission.

Your privacy is extremely important to me. Therefore, I will refer to you with an alias in my report. Please tell me now if you would like me to do that.

I would also like to audio-record our conversation so that I can focus on our conversation and not on taking notes. Please let me know if this is OK. My advisor and I will be the only ones who will have access to these recordings. After I make transcripts and complete this project, I will destroy these recordings. Also, if there is anything I do throughout our interview that makes you uncomfortable please let me know and I will change it.

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to ask me now.
If you have any questions at a later time, feel free to stop and ask me if you see me around The Midnight Mission. I will also give you a contact card with information for my advisor and me. I have provided The Midnight Mission with this contact information, so please feel free to ask for Georgia Berkovich or any of the staff members if you need this info. Thank you for your time.

***Participant Questions***

*Family & Background*

- First off, could you please tell me your age?
- Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood?
    - What was your childhood dream?
    - What did you want to be when you grew up?
    - Who was your childhood hero?
- Where did you grow up?
    - What was the economic level of the area?
    - What was the racial breakdown of the area?
- What was your family like?
    - What kind of jobs did your parents have?
    - What was their education level?
    - Were both your parents married?
- Describe your education.
    - What kind of student were you?
    - Would you consider yourself a hard worker?
- Describe your previous work experience.
    - What was your last job?
    - Why are you no longer working there?
- Are you or have you been married?
    - If previously married: What happened to your relationship?
- Do you have any kids?
- Are you still in contact with your family, including kids?
    - Are they aware of your current situation? What do they think about it?

*Assistance*

- Do you feel that you need help from someone else in order to get out of this situation?
    - *If yes*: What do you need?
- What kinds of assistance are you getting right now?
- Have you ever asked your family for help?
    - Has your family ever helped you out?
    - If they asked: Why are you still here?
- *For Black men*: Is it hard for you to receive help from others? Do you think the same is true for other Black men?
- Besides your family and TMM, who else have you asked for help?
    - From whom else have you received help?

*Private Information (Subpopulation Comparison)*

If respondents mention private information i.e. incarceration, health issues, and/or substance abuse:

- What was that experience like for you?
- How has that affected your life?

*Life of Homelessness*

- What happened that made you be in the situation you are currently in?
- Is this the first time you have been in this situation?
- If not the first time: How many times have you been in this kind of a situation?
    - For how long were you in each situation?
- How long have you been in your current situation?
- Why do you think you are in the place that you are today?
- Why do you think you have been in this situation for (insert length of time)?
- What do you think is the major reason(s) for other people being in the same situation as you?
- Are you currently looking for work?
    - What skills do you have?
    - What kind of experience do you have?
    - In what ways are you at a disadvantage for finding work?
    - Where have you been searching for work?
    - If haven't found any jobs: Where else will you be looking?
- What do you do on a daily basis?
- What are the benefits, if any, of living like this?
- What is the one thing that you miss the most?

*The Midnight Mission (TMM)*

- What do you think of TMM?
- Do you sleep out here in the courtyard?
- How much time do you spend here?
- Are you taking or have you taken any of the computer or education classes here at TMM?
- Why did you choose to stay at TMM?
- Why did you choose to spend your time on Skid Row?
- Did it have anything to do with the fact that there are so many shelters in this area?
- *For those in the program*: Why did you decide to be a part of the recovery program here at TMM?
- *For those in the program*: Is TMM recovery program the first one you have been a part of?
- *For those in the program*: What Level are you currently in?
- What do you think of the other people sharing this space with you…(in the courtyard) or (in the recovery program)?

*Miscellaneous Opinion*

- What worries you the most?
- What are you most thankful for at this point in your life?
- What is your greatest regret?
- Where do you see yourself in five years?
- Did you ever, at any point in your life, think you'd be where you are today?
- Do you think your race has caused you to be in the place you are today?
- *For Black men*: I have seen a lot of Black men at TMM and on Skid Row. Why do you think that is?
- How can the government best fix the problems of poverty and homelessness?

*Conclusion*

- Do you have anything else to add that was not covered in the interview?
- Do you recommend anyone in particular that I should also interview?